

THE PICTURES

By May Sinclair

THOSE drawings are all right. But if you want to see the most interesting things I ever did—interesting from your point of view—there!

No, you haven't got to say they're clever. Their interest—for you—doesn't lie in their cleverness or in the way they're done. It lies entirely in their sequence and in my utter unconsciousness of what I was doing. You'll see, if you'll go through them as they come, the gradual putting together of a man.

I tell you, I didn't know what I was about. I had my flashes, but that sort of continuous performance is your job, not mine. I was the blind instrument chosen by heaven to express Markham as he never could have expressed himself.

Who was he? Only a model, and an amateur, utterly uninspired, at that. He turned up as they nearly all do, on a Monday morning. Of course you get them of all shapes and sizes, but I wasn't prepared for anything so small, so weedy, so insignificant as Markham. It was inconceivable that he should offer himself as a model. If he hadn't been so shabby I should have said he was an agent for some commercial enterprise. He stood on my doormat with the air of a superior person who has called by appointment on important business. He asked me if Mr. Roland Simpson was in.

That was his first insult, his pretending not to recognize me as the lord of the studio. Of course he knew perfectly well who I was. I had on my old painting jacket, and I could see his little malignant eyes fixed on my palette and sheaf of brushes.

I said that Mr. Simpson was in, but he was engaged—excessively busy. And I declare to you that this thing—it had no appearance, mind you, of a man beyond its wisp of a mustache—this deplorable object on my doormat actually sniffed when I told it I was busy. It said it would call again later on when I was—not quite so busy.

He did call again. He called on the following Monday, when I was out, and on the Monday after that. He was weedier, shabbier, more insignificant and more contemptuous than ever. It was a perfectly beastly day—sleet turning to rain. He was soaked through and stood shivering in the pool he made. His face was all pinched and drawn and sallow.

I wasn't busy that morning and I said so. The admission, curiously enough, seemed to soften him; but only for a moment. I told him he had better come in and dry himself. He came in with the lofty reluctance of a man pressed for time and conferring a favor; and he took up a position before my stove for ever so long, with clouds and mists and long shreds of steam wreathing and writhing out of him. It wasn't till he had turned himself round and began to steam backward that he was able to look about him. Evidently he had never been in a studio before. He was taking it all in—the big north light, the platform for the model, the easels and all my poor properties. He seemed to be counting them, appraising them—their shabbiness and cheapness, I supposed—for some unintelligible purpose of his own. Then, when he'd finished his valuation, he gave—well, you can only describe it as another and infinitely

more complicated sniff. I can't tell you what there was in it: disparagement, hostility, defiance. Whatever malignity had been left over from his former attitude he pressed into that supreme, that implacable sniff.

I remember I mixed him some whiskey and water, rather stiff and hot, and I looked for his eye to kindle as I gave it to him. It didn't. He took the whiskey, took it as if it had been his birth-right that I had kept him out of for many years, but he drank it with no enthusiasm. He didn't even finish it. Whatever depths he had sunk to, it wasn't drink that had brought him there.

By this time he was firmly seated, and he presently made it clear that he was prepared to sit to me for as many hours, he said, as I chose. I broke it to him as gently as I could that I had no use for him.

He said: "Then I suppose *I* shall have to starve."

He didn't whine about it (from the beginning to the end of our acquaintance Markham never whined). On the contrary, he smiled like one calling your attention to a preposterous case. That he should starve while *I* was nourished, what, he seemed to say, could be more preposterous? He displayed a decorous, a perfect and superb detachment in contemplating the monstrous irony of the thing. He implied unmistakably that it was up to me to put an end to it. By my putting an end to it the purposes of eternal justice would certainly be appeased; but, as for him, responsibility in this matter could hardly be expected of him.

It ended by my engaging Markham to sit to me, from time to time, at three and sixpence an hour. But I told him again I was afraid I wouldn't have much use for him.

How little use I had those sketches you've got there will show you. First of all, there are only bits of him—not even that—bits of his clothes, a boot, a sleeve, a trouser leg. Then *he* comes—a hand, a foot; dozens of them. There are his toes, all crumpled just as he took them out of his boot. (No, he

hadn't any socks on that time. He went away in a pair of mine.) Then the figure—every conceivable posture, and all spontaneous. Then his face—

The faces frighten you, do they? They used to frighten me, some of them.

And then—

I'm afraid he wouldn't have liked you to see these studies from the nude; but you've got to; it's the only way you can get at him. And if he'd known how tender you are—I shouldn't show them to you if you weren't.

You *do* begin to see him?

I say, do you feel a draught from that window? You've got a cold or something, haven't you?

Oh, come, if I'd known you were going to take him that way—you mustn't, really. Yes, I know, it's his poor back. I couldn't bear it, either. There was something about it that fetched me, nettled me, every time. If it hadn't been for Markham's back I don't think I could have gone on employing him.

That? It *is* terrible. He's crouching down, do you see, by the stove to warm himself. He didn't know at first I was drawing him. He always shivered when he had his clothes off. The other models get used to it. He never did. Perhaps I oughtn't to have done it. It was pitiful—his posture. But I couldn't resist it. I wanted just that, the sharpness of the spine, and the strained curve of the lean hips—

That's not what you mean? Oh—he's looking round so queerly because he's looking at *me*. He hated me. I stood between him and starvation. I was the only thing that stood. That was why he hated me.

But I didn't realize the extent of it until I made him sit for the nude. I was tired of drawing Markham with his clothes on. I was just beginning to see something in him. I found that his precise type of insignificance was jolly difficult to draw. There was something subtle and elusive, as they say, about his character, his quality, the meanness of the little mean man.

And I was only half getting him. I felt that his face was powerless to ex-

press all the horridness of his horrid little soul. That, the essence of him, could only be revealed in its perfection through his whole body. He wasn't altogether valueless. There were possibilities there. The more I worked at his face, the more I wanted to see and to draw his body, poisoned, stunted and distorted by his soul.

But for a long time he refused flatly to sit for the nude. He said it was bad enough to have to sit to me at all, but there were limits to the degradation he was prepared to undergo. Though I mightn't think it, he had about him some last shreds of human dignity. And for a long time I respected his poor prejudice. I didn't press him to chuck it; though I considered he owed me as much for all the time I'd wasted over him in the beginning.

But at last the day came when I had to tell him that he needn't come any more. There was absolutely nothing more that I could do with him. As he knew, I only wanted him now for one thing, and since he objected—I put it to him that I couldn't go on drawing his hands and feet and face forever. There really wasn't—at least I thought there wasn't—an aspect of him that I hadn't got.

Well, poor Markham must have been at the last extremity. He consented. He suffered the ultimate humiliation.

After that his rancor became fierce and uncontrollable. Up till then he'd taken it out, as you may say, in faces. He'd never said anything. Of course I'd been aware of his contempt. He'd shown that pretty freely from the first, and I thought he resented the shabbiness of the scene in which he found himself. I'd placed him now as a broken-down valet dismissed for general incompetence. I fancied I perceived in him a flunkey's disdain for my way of living. I thought all the time that he knew, and wished to show me that he knew, I hadn't sold a picture since he came.

There, I own, I did him a great wrong.

There were moments when I longed to say to Markham that it was his fault if I hadn't sold a picture, and that if he

continued to come much longer I should be a ruined man; that he surely didn't suppose his appearance in my canvases helped me to sell them. But I didn't say it. I ought to tell you that Markham didn't take any interest in my canvases. He never strolled round my studio looking at them, cocking his head and making remarks, stimulating or otherwise. Like Miss Dancy.

Markham, by the way, hadn't realized Miss Dancy yet. If I had not concealed Miss Dancy from Markham, I had very carefully concealed Markham from Miss Dancy. That girl's sense of humor is ungovernable, and if I'd sprung Markham on her suddenly she'd have giggled in his face and hurt his feelings. Besides, she's a shrewd little cockney devil, and she's caught me more than once in flagrant philanthropy. She was quite capable of shooing Markham off my doormat if she'd found him there.

Well, one morning he found *her*—in my studio. (The charwoman had let him in.) She had been sitting, in a purple kimono, with her hair down her back, and I think it gave him a perceptible shock to see that I employed another model. For a wonder I'd sold a picture—"The Woman in the Torn Gown." The Woman was Miss Dancy. She was saying the title was a "shyme," because her gowns were never torn, and I was trying to soothe her down when Markham popped in.

I called to him to come here. I said: "What do you think of that picture, Markham? I've sold it."

(I really wanted him to know.)

He looked at it, and he looked at Miss Dancy, and he looked at me. And he laughed out loud. A sardonic laugh. I'd never believed in a sardonic laugh before. Now I heard one.

He said: "I think it's just the sort of picture that *would* sell. What else did you expect?" Then a horrible noise came out of his throat like the growl of a savage animal. "Ar-rr-rh! The Gr-reat Bir-ritish Public!"

Miss Dancy had turned round and was staring at him. To my immense relief she didn't giggle. There was

something in the stare, I suppose, that was too much for Markham, for he turned his back on both of us and stalked out of the studio.

Miss Dancy's stare went after him. He must have felt it in his spine.

She nodded her head as much as to say, "*I know you*," as the door slammed behind him. Then she spoke.

"Green-eyed monster! That's what's the matter with 'im."

I said the poor chap didn't know he had a rival. I said she was such a stunner no wonder he was jealous of her.

She said: "Me indeed! It's you he's jealous of. It's given 'im fits."

"But why? Why?" I marveled.

"Because 'e's a failure and you're a success, Mr. Simpson."

"Me a success?"

I'd never thought of myself in that light, nor had anybody else besides Miss Dancy, who was always kind to me.

"Yes, you," she said. "He can't stand your 'avin' sold that picture. Shouldn't wonder if 'e was a bit in the same line himself—come down like."

I remember we amused ourselves by arguing the point.

But, incredible as it may seem, the girl was right.

He called the next day about tea-time and I let him in. I hadn't any use for him, as Miss Dancy was sitting again that afternoon. But he was looking more than usually sharp and seedy, and I hadn't the heart to send him away with the sound of the tea things in his ears. So he came in and found Miss Dancy fairly in possession, seated behind the tea tray in my best chair, with an old coat of mine in her lap that she had been mending. Markham stood and glared at her, confirming *my* theory. She was in the purple kimono with her hair down her back.

When he had had his tea he did what he had never done before. He walked across to the other side of the studio where there was a whole row of the drawings I'd done of him. He asked me if I'd sold any of those? (I hadn't.)

I said I didn't sell my stuff every day, worse luck; and he turned on me as much as to say I lied.

Then he burst out: "You sell more of it, Mr. Simpson, than you care to own up to. But you can't deceive *me*. D'you think I haven't eyes in my head? D'you think I don't know the meanin' of all this here—statues—and busts—and Persian carpets—" He was staring and pointing at things. "Those 'angin's, and those disgustin' cushions all about—and you pretendin' you can paint the stuff that doesn't sell! I make no doubt you eat your bellyful"—I'm sorry, dear lady, but he *said* it. I ate my bellyful four times a day according to Markham. "You've only got to splash some paint down on a canvas any'ow, and you get your eighty and your hundred guineas for it. Everything you want you can get. Wine! *Women!*" He snarled it. (Miss Dancy had gone behind a screen with the tea things, and I could hear her giggling there.)

You've no idea how funny he was. The place was inconceivably shabby, worse even than it is now. I assure you, I hadn't a thing that to a sane mind would have suggested the smallest earning capacity. But Markham thought he was in a scene of brutal, terrifying and iniquitous opulence. He thought poor little Miss Dancy was my mistress whom I kept in luxury. It must have been the purple kimono that excited him.

"And you talk about your Art. Your Art!"

I took him as politely as I could. There was nothing else to be done, with Miss Dancy behind the screen all the time, dashing my teacups about to cover her giggles.

I said suavely: "And you have no use for art, Mr. Markham, as a Socialist!"

I really thought I'd placed him that time.

It brought him up sharp.

"It's enough," he said, "to *turn* me Socialist."

I put it to him that that was all very well, but hadn't he noticed that I never *did* talk about it?

He replied, with sudden astonishing coolness, that I was clever. I knew better than to talk to *him*.

And there's his face for you as I drew him, snarling. (I was drawing him all the time, only he didn't know it.) It shows you how far I'd got with Markham. With Miss Dancy's assistance I'd placed him as the unpleasant, peevish proletarian, the little mean man; with just a glint of insanity illuminating his meanness.

After that, Markham, who had been pretty continuous for nearly two years, suddenly left off coming. I remember thinking that he was probably ashamed of his own outburst, or else a little frightened.

Then one day I came on him in Kensington Gardens. He seemed to be crouching like a wild thing among the trees. I got him sideways on. I could have spotted the curve of his spine a mile off, but I couldn't make out what he was doing.

As I came on I saw that he was really sitting on a campstool. He had a canvas on his knees, and a palette. I could see it and the gesture of his hand. He was painting.

It was one of those late afternoons in September when you get lots of blue and purple and gold in the Gardens. The grass was a divine green, and Markham must have had a perfect pool of it in front of him, with a clump of trees beyond. I could swear to the bit he was trying to do, because I'd done it myself from the very same place.

Presently he got up and packed his things and came toward me. I noticed how awkwardly he carried his wet canvas. I was going southward down the Broad Walk, and he was heading northwest in the direction of Notting Hill Gate; so that the sunset caught him splendidly as he came.

He was walking rather fast, very upright and with his head in the air, walking under light as if under water. But that didn't account for the look on his face. It was the look of ecstasy, and the effect of it—on *that* face—was perfectly uncanny.

He went clean past me without seeing me.

If he'd seen me I think he'd have shown some self-consciousness. He was

plunged deep, immersed in his dream, his vision. He seemed to float, to drift by me in it.

Uncanny.

It was as a visionary that I knew him next. There! That's how he looked when he brought me his pictures. Wonderful, is it? It's the only wonderful thing I ever did, and it isn't half as wonderful as he was.

His bringing them, of course, was only a question of time. I think he'd been saving them up, putting off with a voluptuous delay the moment when he should confront me with them—with his genius, you know—and crush me. He must have been brooding for months over this exquisite revenge. You see, he hated me—hated me; and there was no other way he could think of to get back on me. He was tired of insulting me. It didn't really satisfy him.

Besides, he had his vanity.

So he brought his pictures. There were about a score of drawings in a ragged portfolio, and half a dozen or so of canvases. He didn't spring them on me all at once—he was too great an artist to risk spoiling his effect; he waited till I went off to wash my hands, and then he whipped them out like one o'clock and stuck them up, all in a row, in the best light in my studio, as if he were giving a one-man show there.

And when I came back he was ready for me.

He said: "There! If you want to see the stuff that doesn't sell—look *there!*"

I looked—at Markham. I was afraid to miss a second of him. His face was working in a sort of frenzy, and he waved his hands with wild gestures.

He said I needn't be frightened. He didn't want me to buy one. The pictures, he explained, were not for sale. Never in his life had he sold a picture. He would as soon think of selling his wife's honor or his own. Rather than prostitute his genius by selling a picture, he preferred to strip and stand naked on that platform.

He seemed to have exhausted his frenzy in that evocation of supreme

abasement. All of a sudden he became extraordinarily still. He said I needn't suppose that he was jealous of my success, or that he grudged me one shilling that I earned by my unfathomable ignominy. He might have been some great calm judge, merciful but incorruptible, pronouncing sentence on me. I needed all I could get, he said, to make up to me for the shame and the torture I must suffer in turning out bad work. Millions and billions of pounds would never have made it up to *him*. As it was, nothing could give him, nothing could take from him the blessedness of his state and the unsurpassable splendor of the things that he had seen. His genius was unrecognized now; but what *was* "now"? Why should he worry about a little miserable fraction of a century, when he knew, with an absolute and self-sufficing certainty, that the everlasting future would be his?

I haven't given you precisely his own words, but that was the substance and the spirit of what he said. His certainty, his denunciation and defiance, the sense of rapture and of vision that he created, were the most magnificent things of their kind that I have ever come across.

And the pictures? Oh, the pictures were deplorable. Worse, far worse, than anything you can imagine.

Don't look so unhappy. They didn't matter. It was the dream that mattered. The perfect artist may exhaust his dream by too complete embodiment. Think of the stuff Markham must have had *left over*? Surely you wouldn't have had him debase his vision by anything so banal as accomplishment? No—no—no! He kept it fine, he kept it pure, imperishable in its own spiritual medium. Why he should ever have tried to paint at all I can't think.

Yes, I thought I'd got him that time—a flash of him—the inspired absurdity he was. It just shows you that inspiration may exist independently of the smallest capacity to produce.

A little mad? Perhaps. But what a benign madness! I declare I envied him. He was safe—safe—safe.

I thought *that*—his divine frenzy—was the end of him as far as I was concerned; that he'd gone off in a blaze of glory. Months passed and he never turned up.

Then a note came, a little dirty note, giving Star Street as his address. He intimated that he was willing to sit for me again if I would make an appointment.

I made one for a day a week ahead. It came. But no Markham. He sent, by a late post, another dirty little note to say that he was ill and that his wife was ill. He hadn't been able to come—didn't know now when he would be able.

The wording of that note struck me as suggesting more misery than Markham could bring himself to tell.

I went over the next afternoon to look him up. I didn't know where Star Street was. But I found it somewhere near the Edgware Road—a street of considerable squalor; and finally I found Markham.

It was in an awful little room on the top floor, and the landlady said I might go in. But I didn't go in. I stood for two seconds on the threshold and saw what I had no right to see.

Markham, in his day clothes, was sitting beside a bed that faced the door. I couldn't help seeing it. I couldn't help seeing him. He was leaning over the bed, as he sat, and with his right arm he held, supported somehow, a woman. He had raised her body half out of the bed, propped on her pillows. Her nightgown had fallen open, showing her starved breasts. Her head was dropping, all limp, toward his shoulder. The face was livid, the lips drawn up stark from the teeth, the eyes staring.

No, she was alive then; but she didn't look it.

To this face Markham's face was stretched—almost touching. And the look on it and the whole gesture of his body was indescribable. It had the impetus of passion, and defiance—defiance of death—and, above all, tenderness. A terrible, straining tenderness.

I don't think he knew when I came or when I left, yet I'm certain he knew I

was there, for he moved his other hand—his left—and drew her poor night-gown close. But he showed no resentment of my presence. He was past that.

I went to see him again. Afterward. She had died that night.

There was nothing you could do for him except to pay the doctor and the undertaker. I believe he hated me for that more than ever. It rubbed it into

him, you see, that I could do what he couldn't. . . .

This picture—here—is the end—my last sight of him. From memory, of course.

How could I? You think I oughtn't to have done it? But—I had to. It was, in its way, the most divine thing I ever saw.

Besides—after all my shots at him—it's the real Markham.



A WOMAN OF THE STREETS

By Charles Hanson Towne

I WISH I had not seen them—

Peach bloom, pear bloom and apple blossom white,
Swaying in the wind like candles in the night.
I wish I had not seen them hanging on the bough—
For I am in my city chains, city weary now.

I wish I had not seen them—

Long, long lanes, and hawthorn rows of glory,
Bright-bannered mornings with the good God's ancient story
Writ in red embroidery on the far, high hills—
I wish I had not seen them, for now their memory kills.

I wish I had not seen them—

The ranks of scarlet poppies dancing in the corn
When the world lay easy on the heart of the morn;
And the shining battalions of the surging rain—
I wish I had not seen them, for they bring me pain.

The hard, grim stones in the gray old town,
The dull days, the sad days, they weigh me down.
But heavier is my soul for the lost things good and sweet—
Oh, I wish I could not see them when I walk the iron street!



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